

VOLGA GERMAN HOUSES

The houses that Volga German immigrants first built on the plains of Kansas were made of sod. Sod is the top several inches of grass, roots, and soil covering the surface of the grassy plains. In Kansas and also in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, North and South Dakota, etc., the sod was especially tough and strong because the grass had never been dug up and the roots and soil had grown tightly together. Using a brechpflug or sod-busting plow the Volga Germans would cut through the sod, making long strips. The long strips would be cut into individual bricks, and then the pieces of sod could be laid one on top of the other, like bricks, to build the walls of the house. Although many American pioneers built sod houses, the Volga Germans built theirs a little differently. Their simolinka or sod house was dug three feet into the ground. The other three feet on top of the ground (to make the walls six feet high) was made of sod bricks laid one on top of the other. The roof was made by laying boards or logs across the top of the walls and then placing sod bricks on top of that. In all, the house was about 18' wide and 30' long.

Simolinkas had been used by Volga Germans on the steppes in Russia. Because the Kansas plains and the steppes were so much alike, the Volga Germans could use many of the house-building skills they had learned in Russia. So, when they immigrated to Kansas and found a need for a weather-tight shelter that could be built quickly and cheaply, they drew on their past experience with the simolinka.

Inside, the simolinka was like other sod houses - dark and cool in summer, dark and warm in winter. The inside walls were plastered with mud and prairie grass and then were sometimes whitewashed by the women with a mixture of clay and Lebaster or burnt gypsum. After it rained, the walls would have to be whitewashed again because the rain ran down the walls and made dirty streaks.

But the simolinka was only temporary. As soon as they had the time to spare, Volga Germans put up more permanent homes. In Ellis county and the surrounding area, the cheapest and most available building material was limestone. The Volga Germans had built their homes in Russia of sun-dried brick held together with a clay mud mortar. When they built their first limestone houses in Kansas, they used that same clay mud to hold the stones together. In the Kansas climate with strong winds and rain, that mud between the stones did not last long and had to be replaced often. Eventually they learned to make a mortar of sand and lime which held together much better, and learned techniques of quarrying and building with limestone from a priest who had been a stone-mason. After 1900, because of that priest's influence, stone homes were better built.

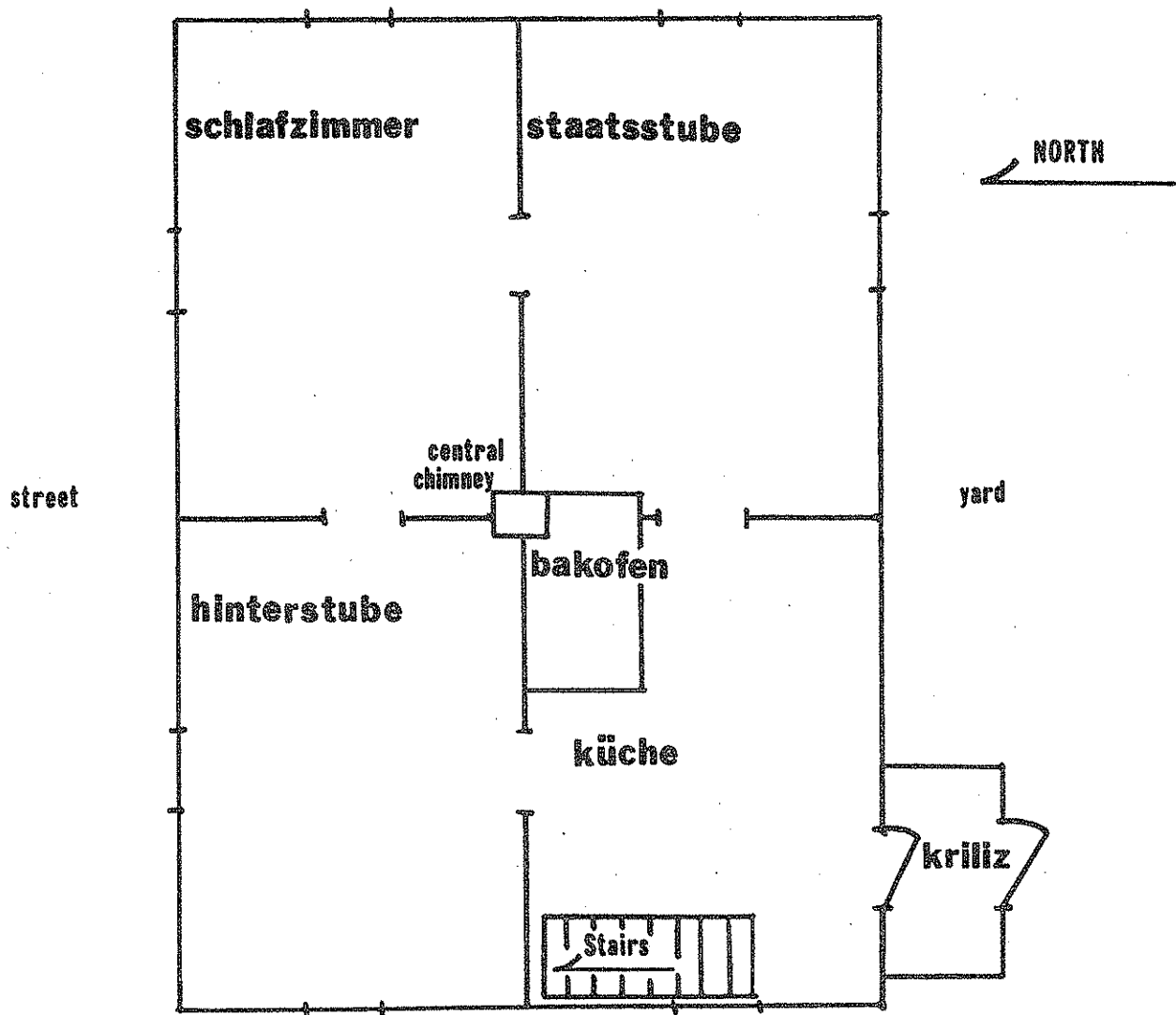
Wood, though, was the building material the Volga German liked best. Each family desired to have a frame house and built one as soon as they could afford it. Often, they simply covered over the old stone house with wooden siding. If frame houses were built new, they were put on stone slabs - no basement was dug. To make the houses heavier and to help hold them on those slabs when strong winds blew, the Volga Germans filled the walls with a stone and mud mixture called nogging. Nogging had been used in Russia to make the house warmer. In Kansas they used it to keep the house from blowing off its foundations.

Although Volga German houses in Kansas were made of materials different from those used in Russia, the shape of the house, the rooms in it, and the placement of the door and windows stayed the same. The einfaches haus or simple house was a single-story rectangular house, also about 30' long and 18' wide, divided into four equal-sized rooms. The house usually faced north with few windows on the north or west because of the cold winter wind. The entrance to the house was usually at the back on the south or warmer side. It opened onto a small courtyard surrounded by a wood or iron picket fence. Volga German houses did not

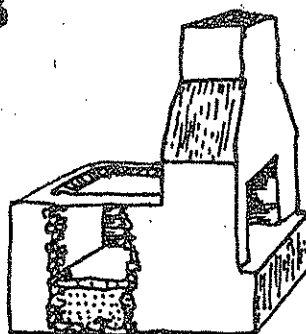
have a front door.

To go inside the house, a person opened the outside door which led either directly into the küche or into a small entry called a kriliz. In the kriliz, people could take off their coats and boots before opening a second door and walking into the kitchen. By closing the outside door before opening the door into the kitchen, they kept the cold wind from blowing in during the winter. Many einfache haus in Kansas did not have a kriliz, probably because the winters were not as cold as those in Russia. A bakofen, built of sun-dried bricks, took up $\frac{1}{4}$ of the küche. That huge backofen heated the entire house and on that oven the mother, her daughters, and her daughters-in-law cooked the meals. They burned a special fuel in the backofen called "mishholz" or mist for short. Volga Germans had made and used mishholz in Russia as well as in Kansas. It was made by mixing barnyard manure and straw together, packing it in a shallow hole and tramping horses back and forth through it. After the sun had dried the mist, it was cut into blocks and stacked for use in the bakofen. It made a hot fire and burned much like the buffalo chips that other prairie pioneers used. With hardly any trees growing in western Kansas, mist was a good substitute for wood.

Because families were very close and the father continued to be head of the family until he died, children often lived at home even after they were married. That meant that sometimes the father and mother, two or three sons, their wives and children all lived in one small house. Children slept in the small attic which was reached by a stairway located in the kitchen. One of the four rooms downstairs belonged to the patriarch and his wife. The other two rooms were divided up between the rest of the adults (the patriarch's sons and daughters-in-law). One can imagine what a busy, crowded place such a house would have been.



Volga German
"Einfaches Haus"
and
"Bakofen"



THE "BAKOFEN" OR BAKING OVEN WAS USED IN EARLY DAYS FOR BAKING, COOKING AND HEATING. THE BRICK WAS HOME-MADE OF SOIL MIXED WITH STRAW AND THEN DRIED IN THE SUN. ANYTHING COULD BE USED FOR FUEL, INCLUDING "MISTHOLZ".